“I came here to draw, not to write”

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Abstract

Most art and design students increasingly see written work as irrelevant. However, recent innovative assignments which judiciously mix formal constraints and reflective freedom have encouraged students to apply critical thinking to their practical work. This paper analyses three such written assignments and outlines a fourth, to be delivered in autumn 2010, which aim to inject rewarding creativity into student writing.

The students are from Coventry University's School of Art and Design, and range from Art and Design Foundation to undergraduates in Fashion and Graphics. The assignments set meaningful restriction against opportunity: for example, essay lengths are set in terms of the physical space allowed (page extent, or maximum page area: thus students can integrate emerging arguments with layout) instead of word count; picture captions have very specific overall lengths but can be distributed at will amongst the images (thus the images can be strung together as part of a sub- or meta-narrative); conclusions have to be presented wordlessly as one-page picture essays (thus encouraging students to summarise cogently whilst at the same time considering intelligently ambiguous reading as a way of adumbrating meta-truths); and the main points of a hypothetical debate between students and their chosen practitioners for comparison are to be presented as a dialogue replacing the original speech in short clips from feature films (thus obliging students to exploit genre and expectation in text / image combinations).

Students have enjoyed the work: not only have they reflected constructively about their practice, but they have also produced work of appropriate scholarly content. However, the work has not favoured those predisposed to write: it has favoured those predisposed to develop sophisticated critical insights as creative visual arts practitioners.

Keywords: Constraints, ambiguity, interpretation, application.

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Few would doubt the capacity and value of writing to bring about critical thinking in art and design undergraduate students – except perhaps the students themselves. In a recessionary era with a tough jobs market at the end of an expensive university education, art and design students[1] tend to concentrate on improving their practice, finding it hard to understand why they have to do any kind of writing at all. In response, some United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) institutional policy is to retain the format of the dissertation (long essay) or reflective practice logbook, but to reduce the word count. This is an often arbitrary figure (for example 4,000 to 3,000 words), and is meant to make the exercise seem less daunting. Ironically, this reduction can make the exercise even harder, because tutors and students alike often confuse extent with effort and forget that judicious editing needs a sophisticated and experienced touch. Other policies have seen both dissertation and reflective practice replaced by a report, which usually lacks any critical reflection at all and becomes a meticulous description of process instead.

Many final year students thoroughly enjoy the dissertation or reflective practice, however. They relish the intellectual challenge, respect their own achievement and find some connection to practice. Comments about the dissertation in Coventry University from 2008 included: "it made you think about

[1] All references to students in this paper are to current or past students at Coventry University's School of Art and Design in the United Kingdom. The groups are from Foundation Studies, which is a Further Education (FE) pre-undergraduate diagnostic year at the University (but not necessarily undertaken by all students who go on to undergraduate courses); and from Fashion and Graphic Design undergraduate students at all levels.

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and construct an argument, which I suppose you wouldn't normally think about"; "this module inspires critical thinking and contextual analysis like no other"; "it's so nice [...] to do something more writing-based rather than drawing all the time"; "it forced me to research a topic which is essential to my practice" [1]. It's also fair to say that these are not the majority of students – the majority end these modules with relief.

The students are from increasingly diverse backgrounds and stages in life. They are usually unsure of university terms of engagement, of the point of HE, and of how to handle criticism. It is often hard for staff and students to find a common language of effective studio-based criticism. This difficulty can confine the criticism to the particular terms of the staff / student dialogue, and can in turn diminish any useful, wider implications of the criticism. It is tempting for these students to dismiss any criticism of their work as trivial and parochial if they feel it lacks the authority of accepted wider discourse. The reverse is also true. Many students like to be told what to do in the studio because they see this advice as safe and authoritative. They are reluctant to take risks in final submissions, often linking creativity with existing industrial practice. They can be suspicious of inspirational caprice in their understandable anxiety for good grades.

The crux of this is education versus training. Carl von Clausewitz's desire to "educate the mind of the future commander [to] guide him in his self-education [...] just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man's intellectual development but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life" [2] might be seen as a luxury in today's economic climate. However, his treatise is still seen as relevant today – and he was dealing with life and death. University tends to celebrate autonomy and self-direction, and caring lecturers will want to prepare students for life as von Clausewitz did, yet many students are clearly unnerved by this and feel reassured by a more apprentice-like experience.

Reflective practice logbooks are in part an effort to minimise the constraints of essay protocols, yet my research at Coventry University shows that a significant number of final year students respect the dissertation essay, and enjoy kicking against constraints. This is part of art and design practice after all: much creativity is measured by the ingenuity with which it deals with constraints such as materials, timing, space, position, file size, shape and extent. The main point of long essays, in dissertation and reflective practice logbook formats, is to argue a topic carefully and absolutely. However, by being long they require major effort, and by being complete they can seem to be quarantined from any wider application.

The four writing assignments discussed in this paper are all notably short text essays with tight formal constraints. Like their literary counterpart the short story, the essays are intended to be engaging and fulfilling, but frustrating. The short story's formal resolution is seen by some critics as essential in generating debatable but discernible meaning. John Bayley asserts that "the more complete the art, the more capable it is of arousing speculation" [3]. Students should accept that formal completion (completion always being a relative term) does not necessarily restrict meaning. It may indeed create multiple meanings, as lack of formal completion may well lead to reductive criticism on formal grounds alone. Students should also realise that "fulfilment in inconclusiveness [is] a speciality of the short story method" [4], because the reader has had to make an effort to interpret the inconclusive, and the interpretation is thus relevant to that reader, even if it were to change on a second reading. The essays aim to offer students the chance to resolve any ambiguities and omissions by evoking their own creative practice: in this case inconclusiveness. I have many discussions with students about when a piece of work is finished. In this way, writing should create productive, practice-based reflection, with the essay itself now sloughed off.

The essays operate within a loose theoretical interplay between new criticism and new historicism, with reader-response linking the two. Broadly speaking, new criticism considers the formal, discounting all contextual influences: the work "is treated as a self-contained and self-sustaining unit of meaning which does not have to be explained in terms of its author's personality or biography" [5]. New historicism does the reverse: works are discussed "in terms of their historical contexts, often minutely researched, as a reaction against [...] new criticism" [6]. Reader-response downplays the author in favour of the reader, who engages with interpretative gaps in the text, Wolfgang Iser's blanks which "prompt acts of ideation on the author's part" [7]. Reader-response might be seen to mediate usefully between the unyielding but tempting extremes of new criticism and new historicism by adding interpretative subjectivity and uncertainty. The assignments deploy reader-response to concentrate on the expansion and interpretation of short essays, rather than on gaps within full-length texts. Many students only see their work in formal terms, an absolute but vulnerable position which does not allow for other interpretative conditions or viewpoints. By contrast, many students construct their work with careful reference to research or documentary evidence, for example, thereby boxing themselves into a

corner in which the process by which the work came about is discussed more than the work itself. Reader-response can help reconcile these two approaches. Although these are principally literary theories, they can thus be applied to the visual arts. I have done this at Coventry University with many art and design disciplines, and Patricia Harkin, citing “stories, poems, plays, buildings, films, TV ads, clothes, body piercings” [8] is in no doubt about the wider domains to which reader-response can be applied.

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The first assignment was for Foundation students, and was launched in Autumn 2009. The title was “Mannequins Are Vile”, which is a corruption of “Manor, Kin, Servile”, key words in their major practical project. This corruption was central – some students saw it as perverse, irresponsible and deliberately mischievous...but it was a plausible misreading, nonetheless. The aim of the essay was to prompt students to reflect on any possible mismatch between what they (as makers) thought their practical work said, and what others (as readers) thought it said: quite a wide scope.

The physical constraints were as follows: 1 side of A3, four parts to the writing, four columns. Part 1, the main part, was allowed two columns, and asked three questions:

“How might your work be misread?”

“What can you do to prevent it from being misread?”

“Would you be upset if it were misread?”

Students had to answer this with reference to their ongoing Foundation work; to my contextual studies lectures, which had an over-arching theme of the slipperiness of meaning in topics such as colour, detail, decoration, genre, semiotics and persuasion; and to the work of at least one other practitioner, contemporary or historical. To add scholarly content and to flag up respect for their work, I insisted on referencing in the Coventry University Harvard Style Guide.

Part 2 allowed a full column to discuss the lecture programme, to identify and discuss individual topics and overall themes. Part 3 allowed a half column to discuss the practitioner – why was he/she chosen? What was his/her contribution to the argument? Part 4 was the conclusion and also had a half column allowance. It asked students to consider how they might change a piece of their practical work for the better in the light of their emerging argument – taking care to explain what “for the better” might mean.

Part 1, therefore, was the framework of the essay; Parts 2, 3 and 4 were the discussion, the component parts, taken out and given suggested relative scales. However, students were free to use any type size and mix of fonts, any images or none at all, and any layout of columns, including mixing them up together and having differing page orientations should they wish. Interestingly, some students did not fill their columns, which they could have done with a bit of typographic adjustment. In this way, they were making a statement about the completeness of their answer and the extent to which it was confidently independent of the constraints.

This assignment could all have been set with a single statement, such as “Your practical work will never say what you want it to. Discuss.” This would be the traditional essay way, and one might reasonably expect students to engage with the topics above. But Foundation students need help with such a philosophical and contentious topic, or else the exercise becomes unnecessarily bewildering and the gems of reflection remain unmined. The standard linear essay is a difficult form, needing skilful adjustment of its component parts to convince.

The insights were more pertinent than in Foundation assignments in previous years, when I had set a conventional linear essay. This year’s external examiners also commented on the standard of the students’ practical work, and on their mature and astute connections and observations.

A selection of the points emerging from the essays themselves are summarised and paraphrased here: “no clarity is achieved without difficulty; we learn how to learn at university; importance of context; some subjects are hard to misread, e.g. anti-war material; fear of creating a wrong reading inhibits; self-criticism and reflection are never negative; what makes art interesting is that it creates room for discussion; if the maker can’t understand the work, readers won’t; the value of asking why something works rather than just recognising that it does; reader-response well defined; explaining too much in a work makes the maker vulnerable and conditions future work too much; theatricality can prevent work becoming too personal; the distinction between saying and implying; misuse versus misreading versus alternative reading; chaos is the constant in a postmodern world; you can get away

with a lot in the name of art; text and image in combination contain meaning better than either can singly; detail can control reading; you can never recreate work because you can never recreate the necessary emotional investment".

These points originally emerged from an analysis of the students' work by the students, filtered through the confessional conclusion of Part 4. Each of these points could be a Masters level dissertation topic yet Foundation students are pre-undergraduate, reinforcing my conviction that these students' creativity is waiting to be activated and applied.

The second assignment was for first year Fashion students, and was launched in Spring 2010. The inspiration was an exhibition of artist Damien Hirst's work in January 2010 at the Wallace Collection, a serene gallery in central London containing mainly fine and decorative arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Students were asked to imagine that the gallery was planning an exhibition of contemporary, cutting-edge fashion design work from anywhere in the world to sit alongside examples of artefacts (not necessarily overtly fashion-related) from the gallery itself. The title of the imaginary exhibition was "Luxury Never Goes Out Of Date", and students had to research all the images: four from the gallery and eight from fashion (for example from magazines, the internet, books, their own work, and / or that of their peers).

Students had to write 150 words explaining the point of the exhibition and 250 words explaining the importance of the exhibition – these texts were to be imagined as boards at the exhibition's entry and exit. All text lengths were non-negotiable. They also had to write 12 words of captions for each picture, making 144 words of captions in total. First discussions were to establish links between the work in the Wallace Collection and contemporary fashion – colour? Materials? Theme? Noise...the rustle of dresses suggested in a Fragonard painting matching a Galliano garment? Once themes emerged, writing exercises were done in class once a week to loosen up students' expression: for example, 50-word sagas, commentaries on fashion images, and imaginary dialogues between characters in fashion magazine adverts.

The captions were a way to expand upon the constraints of the entry and exit texts which book-ended the experience of the imagined exhibition. A vital aspect of this was to allow the overall caption length to be distributed between all the pictures, so that the 12 words per picture rule was actually 144 words per total picture content. This was significant, because some students exploited the freedom to alter the pace of picture reading by varying the word count for each; to reflect the relative importance of each picture in their scheme; to intrigue the reader by varying the information given for similar pictures; and to include the pictures with the caption text as one complete string of narrative, rather than having two separate narratives. It meant that the text register could vary depending on the pictures' provenance and context, and that pairings or other combinations of images could be explained, and / or left relatively unexplained in order to draw the reader in.

The best work in this assignment was from students who had a clear and focused conceptual framework. This gave the caption writing a purpose over and above describing what one could see in the pictures oneself (often a drawback of all captions). Frameworks also licensed credible caption length variations. Examples of these frameworks include the *fête champêtre*, where paintings by Fragonard and Watteau were contrasted with contemporary fashion photographs. By careful caption writing, the student was able to direct readers to aspects of the photographs that opened up a debate about urban clothes in a rural setting, picking up on one of my lecture themes. Another, who was exploring the perception of luxury items in an ecologically fragile world, and the part fashion can play in it, wrote deliberately cryptic captions. These had intriguingly varied text lengths within the overall allowance, intended to encourage readers to make connections between pictures that were not set out next to each other: in other words, to create cross-readings and thus new readings.

The question of achetypes – central to fashion design discourse – was raised in another piece. In this case the luxury was not an object at all, but an abstract notion: seduction. This was explored through archetypal characters such as the queen ("cruel and certain" – a nice use of (visual) alliteration), the amazon whose seduction is born out of the luxury of vanity, the dandy ("hated and admired") and the commander, whose army is "more afraid of him than of the enemy". These contradictions were elaborated by careful choice of image and sequence. There was no obvious archetype sequence – indeed, to impose one might have confined the argument too much – and so the student arranged the images in a formally satisfying sequence (colour, scale, content, for example) that could, almost disingenuously, be taken at face value. The captions, often missing verbs and inconsistently structured, made one read into the pictures. The fashion images in this case were sourced from research, but some students, particularly those whose concepts involved the luxury of colour or

material, used images of their own work, thus directly contextualising their own practice. An interesting coda to this assignment was that the two best pieces were by students whose mother-tongue was not English.

The third assignment was launched in Autumn 2009 to final (3rd) year Graphic Design students. The essay asked a simple question: "What constitutes a good piece of work?", and had a carefully controlled structure oscillating between freedom and constraint. Part 1 (the introduction) asked: "What's the difference between good and bad?" This had to be one side of A4 maximum, text only, but in any style, and could be an opening up of the topic in any direction: practice-based, philosophical, social, or religious, for example. Part 2 was the main argument, and students had to answer the question with reference to their own work and that of any chosen practitioner, refining the theme suggested in Part 1. This main argument had to cover five sides of A4, without any pictures, in any type style, size and layout. The pages did not have to be filled, nor did each page have to be part of a five-page sequence. Each page could be a separate entity, with no page numbering perhaps, so readers could customize (and re-customize) their own experience.

Interestingly, when these students had problems with the relationship between their argument and the space available, they often resorted to editorial solutions: for example, re-writing and running-on paragraphs. One student had set her text in a fairly standard 10 pt and was over-length by about three pages. She was struggling to cut to fit, and I recommended she thought like a graphic designer. It still took her a while to see what I was driving at.[2] Once she had solved the problem she used very self-conscious margins, and found herself editing her text to match the visual feel she had created, as opposed to editing her text to match a hostile space she had inherited.

I had anticipated a problem for many students: saying too much in too small a space (the five pages). They would try to include, and thus validate, all their research efforts and no amount of typographic meddling was going to resolve this. This explains the conclusion specification for this assignment – a single side of A4 containing only images (any number, size, style, colour, layout or origin). The point of the images was not to illustrate each point made in the main argument, but to summarise and to clarify the argument. This helped students make a more cogent link between the looser, single page introduction and the core debate. One Moslem student's introduction was about interpretation and observance of rules in the Koran. His main argument was about the value of rules in graphic design practice, yet his picture conclusion was about development, and did not show rules. He was telling us here about the potential of rules, and not reminding us solely of where his argument had already taken us.

In addition, the generally uncertain meaning of the students' images helped to open up debates and provide wider significance at the end, whilst suggesting alternative readings of the preceding five pages. This was helped because the main argument had no images, and so there was no visual precedent for the images. Students could resort to playful latitude in their suggested conclusions. This sometimes created a Rorschach Test effect, in reader-response terms, whereby the reader was firmly obliged to interpret if only to achieve closure. The conclusion about rules creating development featured images of old-fashioned machinery: the suggestion of misgivings about absolutes is there for the taking.

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The written assignments discussed in this paper are all short text essays, with specific formal restrictions. The aim is that the students perceive uncertainty and ambiguity in their texts which they can explore and resolve at some point – and not necessarily as part of these assignments. The assignments are not about pure compression, but about the imaginative process of leaving something open in one place and closing it in another. The effort of writing many words should be replaced by the creative rewards of writing just the right words, even if these words could have layered meaning (as might their own creative practice). The conceptual connection between what is written and what could be meant has allowed students of all backgrounds and nationalities to feel equal to the challenge (although there are still students for whom any writing is anathema). These assignments do not promise to make every student happy – but they have gone a long way towards it. There is a reassuring creativity in these assignments that reduces students' stress yet increases payback, and there has been connected reflection rather than hermetically-sealed critical thinking. The variety of work makes it fun to mark; the possibilities opened up do not, however, make it quicker to mark.

[2] Make the type smaller!

The discussions about theory and historical precedents in the studio are mostly seen as a welcome break by students in their work schedule, and the short essays are meant to connect these sessions to productive practice. None of these essay assignments is a module in its own right – they are all part of practice-based modules, and I work with students in collaboration with studio tutors. I have been working with short texts since early 2009, when I asked a group of Fashion students to write 152 words about Dior (the *Vogue* review of Dior in 1947 having also just 152 words). One student gave me 152 adjectives and said any or all might apply, depending on who the reader was and what else was going on...

The next task is to see how students' practical work can more palpably benefit from the reflection generated in the three assignments discussed above. Nevertheless, there has definitely been significant development in students' practical work, recognised by external examiners, employers and tutors. With all this in mind, the fourth short text essay assignment, "Cut Across Shorty",[3] is due to be launched this coming autumn (2010), and asks Foundation students to work with film extracts. The essay challenges students with the statement: "Your work isn't creative...it just interferes with someone else's". The students major project at the time will be to do with interference, interruption and intervention, so this brief is aimed at directly shading their practice. Students will be asked to write 100 words of introduction and 100 words of conclusion, with 10 bullet-pointed and properly referenced argument "stepping-stones" in between. They will be asked to consider another practitioner carefully (the "someone else" from the title) in the light of their own practice, and to analyse the differences between inspiration and influence.

The second stage of the project will be to give them a selection of 30-second film extracts from a range of genres. They will have to pick a suitable one and provide new dialogue – in any format or mix of formats: for example, voice-over, sub-titles, silent movie-style boards. They will need to set out their 10 bullet-point argument as a dialogue between them and their selected practitioner in any way they choose within their film extract. They will thus be interfering, and interrupting, and intervening; they will be working with genre; and they will be working with, and subverting, maybe, reader expectation as they graft their work onto that of another, rightly claiming originality. They will be asked to make a 5-second introduction and a 5-second conclusion of their own to add to the extract. The whole piece has now become an essay translated into practice. The film work thus becomes an encapsulated, short text metaphor for their own creative practice. I fondly imagine their interview for university HE next year, when they will be asked for evidence of essay writing and they slide a USB stick across the table.

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[3] This is the title of an early 1960s rock 'n' roll song, and although the relevance to the assignment is more in the words of the title than in the song itself, I would like students to consider music in their assignment.